HE TOUCHED ME
Mark 1:40-45
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I attended a four day convocation on Theology and Preaching last fall at Riverside Church, New York City. That Church, made famous by its first minister, Harry Emerson Fosdick, is the spiritual home of theological liberalism in America. Fosdick started the Church because he was too liberal for the Presbyterians. From its magnificent and influential pulpit he preached the social gospel, fought with theological conservatives and Biblical literalists and, during World War II, became a pacifist. The current Senior Minister is William Sloan Coffin, Jr., former Chaplain at Yale, known for his Civil Rights Activism, and - with Father Berrigan and Benjamin Spock, his involvement in the anti-Vietnam War Movement. His current social commitment is to Disarmament. All of which is to say that Riverside Church is not the place you would choose to go if you want to hear about the personal Gospel and personal salvation. The convocation I attended was led by some of the brightest Christian academics, among them Professor Hans Kung, German Roman Catholic theologian from the University of Tubingen. People went to that meeting not so much to have their hearts warmed and spirits stoked up, as to have their minds challenged, intellects stimulated.

And so it was very much of a surprise to me, coming in late for the opening worship service on the second day, to hear a marvelous baritone voice filling that grand, Gothic Nave with a song I heretofore thought belonged to Barbra Streisand, the slightly mushy love ballad - "He Touched Me". I checked my program and noted his very impressive academic and ecclesiastical credentials. I had not heard what he said in his opening remarks. But the song he was singing contained in that context a powerful testimony about the dynamics of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. You could have heard a pin drop!

Forget about Barbra Streisand: try to imagine the magnificence of that gothic Church, filled with clergy, who were generally more concerned about minimum wage, unemployment, and multinational corporations, than about getting individuals into heaven - mesmerized, as one man sang...

> "He touched me
> He put his hand near mine and then He touched me...
> He's real and the world is alive and shining
> He touched me,
> And suddenly nothing is the same!"

Well, I haven't been able to forget that experience. It was an excellent conference - but one of the more vivid memories will be this one. It was a necessary reminder to me, and to every person present, that what the Christian religion is about essentially is a very personal matter between God and the individual: that it is good and healthy to stretch our minds and consider the Gospel in light of the intellectual challenges coming from psychology, science, philosophy, that the Gospel is indeed about the corporate redemption of the whole creation: that justice and peace are political realities the Church corporate is called to establich, but that ultimately Christianity is about the individual man or woman and what God has done for the individual in Jesus Christ, His Son.

It was a suggestion, appropriately made to that assembly, that the professional ministry wants God to remain abstract and religion academic because it's safer that

way, and that sometimes the large and respectable religious institutions we work for serve simply to tone down and make impersonal that which is, essentially, very intimate.

I was reminded of all of that by the New Testament Lesson this week, the story of Jesus and the man who had leprosy. The story, by the way, is found in Matthew, Mark and Luke. A man with leprosy approached Jesus, fell on his knees and said, "If you will, you can make me clean." And Jesus, moved with pity, stretched out His hand and touched him." The man was healed. Jesus instructed him not to tell what had happened but to report to the priest, as the law prescribed, to be certified as healed -clean. But the man promptly told everybody he knew and so many people came looking for Jesus that He could not move about freely.

To understand the significance of that little story we have to back up a bit and think about the disease the man had. Leprosy was the scourge of the ancient world. When the Bible used the word it refers to what we know as Hansen's Disease, or classical Leprosy, but also any skin disease, rash, discoloration, even mildew on clothing or the walls of buildings. If a fungus grew on a water jug, for instance, people believed that the jug had leprosy.

Diagnostic medicine was not exactly precise. A person had leprosy when a priest said he did. The religious law prescribed treatment and - if this failed - the imposing of a complete taboo: the person was declared "unclean". He was simply banished from society. Physical contact was out of the question - even his shadow was regarded as infectious. He was required to live outside the village, to identify himself by wearing loose, baggy clothing and to give adequate warning by calling out "unclean, unclean!" whenever another person approached. A person with leprosy survived by foraging and begging.

I was interested to learn that the taboo continued into the Middle Ages, that a person who had leprosy was led into church where the priest read the burial service over him, and that churches had a leper squint - a small opening in the wall for lepers to peek through and see the service.

The important thing here is that people with leprosy were not only very sick physically, they were victims of a cruel and total isolation - which, inevitably, made them sick emotionally, spiritually, mentally. Enforced isolation is very powerful. Sociologists think that the judicious use of, and the threat of isolation, is one of the reasons Amish culture maintains itself. It is called Meidung - "Shunning" - or the Bann. Listen to one writer describe it _ "When the pull of the world is too strong for some and they are drawn toward its wicked ways...the leaders of the church visit the errant member. Either he gives in and mends his ways or the 'Bann' is invoked - excommunication - and the social pressure of the Meidung is brought to bear against him. No one, not even members of his own family, including his wife, may have anything to do with him, may conduct business with him, or eat with him or speak to him. The Meidung remains in force, until the sinner makes the required changes in his life...It can, and sometimes does, remain in force for a life time. But few individuals can resist such pressure for long. There are two ways out: to yield, or to leave the district..." (Amish People, Carolyn Meyer, p.78).

In any event, Amish culture demonstrates the power of isolation. That was the case with lepers in Jesus' day. They were cut off totally from the human family. In addition they were not pretty to look at: the religious law called them taboo -

unclean. The result of all of that must have been the worst case of self-loathing, self-disgust, self-hatred - in all of history. How possibly can you feel good about yourself when you can't bear to look at your own image, when others are revolted by your appearance, when the only people with whom you have contact are those who look and feel like you do? It is no surprise that the end of leprosy was often suicide.

That's what this little story is getting at when it says - "He stretched out his hand and touched him." Jesus touched a leper. Nobody did that. Nobody wanted to. Nobody had the stomach to. The miracle here is not that the man was healed of leprosy: the real miracle is the love of Jesus Christ, the personal, physical contact that healed a sick and broken heart, and turned a man who was so full of guilt and self-hatred that he must have been insane, into one so joyfully grateful that he couldn't contain himself.

This is a significant story for many reasons. It shows a Christ who cares more about people than religious rules. It suggests that religion can insulate and separate us from God at times. It suggests that perhaps the business of religion is to identify the untouchables in our society and, in the name of Jesus Christ, to reach out in love and acceptance. But where this story speaks to me is when I contemplate this man Jesus, reaching across that awful gap of isolation to put His hand on the man with leprosy.

That story is powerful because isolation is very real. We may no longer believe in ritual uncleanness, but we do operate with some taboos against intimacy and involvement and touching - figuratively and literally.

The Denver Bronchos football team surprised the athletic world in 1975 by holding hands. When their defensive unit, known affectionately as "the Orange Crushes", took the field and huddled, the players held hands. They liked it, they said: it helped them feel like a team, a unit, a group of individuals who had to depend on and help one another. That gesture went a long way toward ending the slightly neurotic taboo in our culture against men touching men. Athletes embrace in joyful abandon: and there is a lot of patting which would be startling if it took place, say in the board room or at a sales meeting.

The touching taboo in our culture really signifies deeper taboo; against intimacy and involvement. "Don't get too close." "Don't get involved - stay away." The result is personal isolation..Think for a minute about the forms isolation can take in our lives.

Emotional isolation, for instance. Our culture is strongly individualistic. One of its goals is to cultivate self-reliance, self-sufficiency. There is a sense in which that is very admirable. But there is also a sense in which it is sick and painful and isolating. Men, particularly, are taught to be strong which means admitting to needing no one or nothing; never crying, never feeling deeply, sometimes never saying, "I love you and need you."

Or social isolation: Paul Tournier suggests that social rituals are really devices designed to help us get what we want without becoming involved with other people. Linguists suggest that cocktail party conversation is for the distinct purpose of preserving distance while pretending to be communicative. Our culture teaches us that other people are competitors, threats to our own autonomy or pride or ego; and thus objects to be bettered or used, or at least dismissed with as little involvement as possible.

Or the isolation of pain. Each of us has been to the hospital, or will be some day. The bad thing about physical pain is the sense of loneliness and isolation which seem inevitably to accompany it. Our children are very wise when they say, "Kiss it and make it better," because human contact is an antidote to pain. That is documented fact. But adults don't know how to say that, and try to cope with real hurt by bearing it quietly, alone, without telling anyone.

Or moral isolation. I think this is more a reality than most of us would like to admit. Can you remember doing something for which you were truly sorry, something which made you feel ashamed, something very wrong? Can you remember feeling cut off: like you broke something important between yourself and your own conscience, yourself and your family, yourself and the whole human race, yourself and God? One of the enduring strengths of Roman Catholicism is that when a Catholic feels like that he or she goes to confession and makes contact with the human race again. Protestants, on the other hand, simply internalize it and continue to suffer from self-imposed moral isolation.

I think isolation is so real that for many of us the physician becomes our savior because he's the only person with whom we can talk about ourselves, openly, honestly, intimately. I think one of the reasons doctors are so busy is that we have learned that they are the only ones who really mean the words "How are you?" and consequently they are the only ones to whom we are allowed to say "I hurt". I had a close friend who was a general practitioner in another community who used to say that at least half the patients he saw needed to talk to someone, and should have seen a clergyman before coming to him.

This is what the Gospel of Jesus Christ is about. Jesus "stretched out His hand and touched" a man with leprosy.

The psychologists are giving us a new vocabulary to describe a reality theology has always understood. John Calvin saw salvation as justification by faith and justification as, essentially, acceptance. The miracle of the Gospel, the Reformation shouted, is that God accepts us as we are, even when we feel unacceptable. To know that is to be saved.

And so psychologists tell us that in order to be an accepting, open person, we have to accept ourselves; and in order to accept ourselves we have to be accepted by someone else. We can love others, only as we love ourselves. And we can love ourselves only as we sense ourselves loved by others.

I have always found Reuel Howe very helpful in this area. He wrote -

> "...the deepest want of all is the desire to be at one with someone, to have someone who can be at one with us, and through whom we can find at-oneness with all." (Man's Need and God's Action, p.9).

One of the truly sacred responsibilities of parenting is here. Our children will love no one until they sense that they are loved. They will be incapable of accepting others - of accepting life - until they know the security of our acceptance. Wise parents know the difference between demanding enough from children, and demanding so much that they no longer feel accepted. Psychiatrists' offices are full of people spending their lives trying to win the acceptance they did not receive from their parents.

As parents we mediate the very love of God to our children through our love. And as members of one another in the church, baptism symbolizes our commitment to one another to help - to love - to support all the mothers and fathers among us in this sacred task.

Again, it is Reuel Howe who keeps me from being academic about it. He wrote, "We cannot experience (the love of God) solely by reading about it: we cannot experience his love apart from an encounter with him. And so He first revealed His love to men in His incarnate Son living in person-to-person relationship. Now we may experience His love through person-to-person encounter with those who are born into the relationship of His Spirit." (Ibid, p,94-5).

That, it seems to me, is the privilege and responsibility of being the Church. We do not live in 33 A.D.: the love of God in Jesus Christ is not the same for us as His contemporaries. In fact, it is a corporate memory for us - something we hear about - secondhand - no more intimate than George Washington's courage. Nor are we the kind of fellowship which focuses on personal religious experience in conversion. We don't structure experiences in which we expect to feel God's love intensely. The love of God in Jesus Christ remains an idea, an abstraction for us. Until someone conveys it to us: until it becomes incarnate in the life and caring and compassion of another person. That's what this church is - at its best. And at its very best it becomes that love incarnate in the world, reaching out, as He did, across all the gaps that isolate people - to touch them and heal them and give them new life.

The story is for us - not just people with leprosy. We are the ones who have needs. We feel unclean at times, untouchable, unacceptable. There are things about ourselves we don't like, things we don't understand: there are times when we can't stand ourselves.

This little story makes a remarkable assertion about us - and about God. It suggests that God himself is not abstract and remote and distant. That He does not wait in some corner of the universe for us to decide to approach Him. Rather, the God described in the story is one who takes the initiative and reaches out across time and space to touch us, precisely when and where we feel untouchable, unacceptable.

It is about a Lord who took on himself the uncleanness of the man in order to give him life and health and wholeness. We are that man. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is the Good News that God has stretched out His hand toward us: that there is healing in that for us: acceptance and forgiveness and love and joy and wholeness and salvation.

Amen.

God, our Father, for your grace, we give thanks. We try to stay at arm's length, to keep our religion safely abstract. Break through our defenses, our Father. Touch us - heal us - love us - in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.